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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the "transforming spirit of adolescence." The six novels (all have young female protagonists) explored in the paper show the natural bewilderment (and delight) that accompanies new powers and abilities. The paper focuses on radical young adult transformations in Annette Curtis Klause's "Blood and Chocolate," Donna Jo Napoli's "Sirena," Patricia Kindl's "Owl in Love," Melvin Burgess's "Lady: My Life as a Bitch," Linda Hogan's "Power," and Peter Dickinson's "Eva." According to the paper, these books suggest that life is less certain than people might allow, and profoundly mysterious in ways that are often shuttered out. These novels show the complex (and sometimes opposing viewpoints) often co-existing in an adolescent. The paper explores outer transforming novels where young adults routinely take on animal forms. It explains that these books document how the lure of the natural, animal world intermingles (and often conflicts) with the acculturation all adolescents go through. The paper finds that this animal world is more humane, more loving and sensitive than "civilized" culture (at least in these books), and in contrast, these books show the human side as too often fraught with cruelty, intolerance, and horror. Lists 9 works cited. (NKA)

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By Mark Vogel

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English
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Changelings and Radical Mutant Teens: Boundary Pushing In Adolescent Literature.

The transforming spirit of adolescence is at the heart of what this presentation focuses on. The books explored in this presentation will show the natural bewilderment (and delight) that accompanies new powers and abilities. I'll focus on radical young adult transformations in Annette Curtis Klause's *Blood and Chocolate*, Donna Jo Napoli's *Sirena*, Patrice Kindl's *Owl in Love*, Melvin Burgess' *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, Linda Hogan's *Power*, and Peter Dickinson's *Eva*. These books suggest that life is less certain than we might allow, and profoundly mysterious in ways that are often shuttered out. These novels show the complex (and sometimes opposed viewpoints) often co-existing in an adolescent. This presentation explores outer transforming novels where young adults routinely take on animal forms. These books document how the lure of the natural, animal world intermingles (and often conflicts) with the acculturation all adolescents go through.

I began researching this topic by looking for books with animal/human roles. In the process I ended up with six novels with six young women protagonists. Why so many young women? Perhaps the animal/human link forces readers to see the rich abilities of these young women. We can't just say *she's a*

cheerleader; she's a shy girl; she's boy crazy. We have to say she's a whiz at biology—and an owl. Or a beautiful young woman—and a werewolf. Clearly these authors sought to portray powerful young women capable of directing their own fate. Placing these young women in animal and human form forces new contexts for evaluating ways young women can flourish. Combining animal and human forms also helps readers see sexuality and other dangerous topics with new eyes.

In *Lady: My Life as a Bitch* and *Eva,* two normal teenage girls are transformed without warning into animals. Lady and Eva find themselves literally transformed from their human form and placed in an alien animal body. Each retains her full human consciousness within this animal form. Like many other adolescents, these two young women are rudely thrown into a new culture, without rules or guidebooks, with no convenient adjustment period. They have little choice but to cope. When Sandra Farmer, the seventeen-year-old protagonist in *Lady: My Life as a Bitch,* accidentally turns into a dog her own family cannot recognize her essence. They see only a stray mongrel seeking their affection. Without a family or home or stable identity she is turned loose in her community. Her plight resembles what many adolescents face: "I set off again, no idea in my head about who I was or what I was and where I belonged or where to go, except to run and run until my pads bled and my dry

tongue beat the ground (22)." Sandra, like many young adults, doesn't know the rules of how to behave, how to master a new culture, meet new friends, and survive on her own wits.

Adolescents must try out roles and take on personas until the labels they apply to themselves fit. Seeing adolescents in this confused, rapidly changing state, is not new. Adolescents have long been stereotyped as split figures without stability, their warring selves struggling in vain to secure an identity. Whether these conflicting sides are child vs. adult, or instinctual vs. intellectual the difficulties are real. These animal/human books serve as a metaphor for the funny, absurd difficulties of straddling worlds. These young protagonists—whether werewolf, mermaid, owl, dog, panther or chimpanzee--struggle mightily to keep their humanity alive as they walk in-and-out of worlds that do not smoothly mesh.

Let's look more closely at how new intellectual awareness is altered by this animal condition. As adolescents grow closer to adulthood their new intellectual awareness often conflicts with their more primal ("animal") and "instinctual" child side. *Sirena,* by Donna Joe Napoli, is a mermaid who has trouble reconciling her half fish, half human nature. Her human lover describes her difficulties well: "We are all made of little pieces. We are all part this and part that. We are air and water and fire and dirt. But you, Sirena, you are more (102)."

Sirena's newfound ability to make beautiful music has consequences for others. When she and her fellow gregarious siren sing in delight at seeing sailors, they inadvertently lure them to their death. Sirena must deal with this harsh reality, and yet continue to learn about her world. She has little experience and many fears; but she faces her fears head on. She says: "If I yield to fear, my life will become small and dry, until no pleasures touch me at all. I must allow myself adventure (45)."

The young woman in these novels typically **do** allow themselves adventure, and they are not paralyzed by their difficulties. Though much is imposed on them, their choices are what mark them as human (in animal form). Sirena ultimately chooses unselfishly to give up her lover, though she knows she has the power to make him stay. Her ability to see choices and make unselfish decisions is one mark of her approaching adulthood.

Not all of these young women are suddenly thrust into their new animal bodies. Some protagonists have been exploring the human and animal world simultaneously since birth. In *Owl in Love* and *Blood and Chocolate* characters have spent a lifetime possessing knowledge they must hide; they have learned well how to balance personas and remember roles. It's not easy being a female werewolf teenager in New Jersey. Or an owl/human teenager attending a suburban high school.

These animal/human books show us the difficulties young adults have in exposing all of themselves to others. For many adolescents new awareness of their inner and outer selves sometimes frightens even themselves. As they venture into worlds far removed from the safety of home and neighborhood, they learn that revealing themselves to others may be dangerous. Especially when their differences are undeniable. The werewolf and owl sides can be hidden but not removed. Vivian and Owl are radically different in ways that cannot easily be masked. They are different to the core of their being, and their only choice is to accept who and what they are.

Vivian in *Blood and Chocolate*, is both human and werewolf. She wonders if she will always have to hide the essential truths of her nature. As a typical post-modern young adult, she belongs to a multitude of packs and sub-packs. Many of these groups she belongs to possess conflicting values. As she weaves amongst these groups, Vivian craves relationships where she can be accepted and reveal all of herself. When she ventures into human culture in high school classes, she realizes (much like each of our other young woman) that "she [doesn't] know their rules (51)."

These rules are often unstated. Vivian quickly discovers that when attraction is involved, the most essential truths are rarely discussed. Vivian isn't so unusual despite her wolf appearance. What young adult understands what happens when

attraction takes over? How can they, when much of what they experience can't be openly discussed—even with their own kind?

Parents in these books aren't much help. They tend to overemphasize the child attributes and ignore the adult abilities. Though Vivian pines for a complex, adult relationship (involving sexuality), her mother and the other pack members treat her as a child. Vivian complains when they dismiss her feelings as merely a "stage" (69). She is trapped in between, frozen by the viewpoint of others.

Thomas Hine in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* illustrates the difficulties posed by adult gatekeepers. He notes that many teenagers "serve a sentence of presumed immaturity, regardless of their achievements and abilities (16)." Hine states that "The mismatch between young peoples' imposing physical development and their presumed emotional, social, and intellectual immaturity is dramatic (16)."

Vivian is not interested in careening out of control. What she wants is someone who is "open enough to accept the truth about her (77)." Yet, the fear that she will be rejected paralyzes her: "[What] if they saw her in her wolf-shape? They'd be fleeing down the streets like those teenagers on the television (133)." Vivian is right to be afraid of allowing all her abilities to surface. When she finally reveals her wolf nature to her human boyfriend, he is repulsed and horrified. At a tender age, Vivian must

recognize the narrow conformity often practiced by humans. To her credit she continues to listen to her instincts, refusing to deny her full nature.

Balancing instincts and intuitions with demands for conformity is tough for each of these protagonists. In Patrice Kindl's *Owl in Love*, Owl deals with high school trivia, and cliques—while also learning to balance her bird-of-prey "instincts." Owl attends classes during the day and eats mice and hangs out in trees at night. In school she does her best not to stand out as an oddity. Characters as strange as Owl know that simply changing her wardrobe will not make her fit in:

> My fellow students at Wildewood Senior High have always thought me strange, odd... I am very different from them. My blood, for instance, is black, while theirs is red. It is a pretty color, human blood, when it is fresh. (5)

Owl is not surprised by the shifting transformations of adolescents she meets at school. This tolerance for change is bred into her genetic code. Weirdness is inherent in her family. "Others of my family shift to dog- or cat- kind, a few to hoofed or finned beasts" 4). Because Owl has a crush on her science teacher, she often is found flying in his neighborhood, or perched in trees overlooking his house. There she meets a kindred soul, a strange dark boy who has suffered because of his "extra" abilities. The humans he has come in contact with "thought him

demented when he tried to do what his instinct told him he must do (188-189).

Both Owl and her new friend search for cues on how to be human while also following their 'instinct." There is much to learn. Like the other young women we've met, Owl finds the balance between fitting in and following her inner voice doesn't come without mistakes and pain. Any time her owl life intersects with her human life trouble ensues. She survives by being adaptable, and borrowing from both of her complex worlds.

Owl was born with her traits; she didn't choose her abilities. So genetics can be blamed for her feathers and love for mouse delicacies. But in Linda Hogan's *Power*, there is no easy separation between animal and human worlds. Omishto, the sixteen-year-old Native American protagonist, lives in two worlds. One side of her life connects her to high school and her mother's Middle American aspirations. Another world Omisto inhabits is the native tribe of her ancestors--who have long believed in kinship with the Florida panther. The panther, they believed, lived both inside and outside themselves. If the panther was threatened, the tribe was also. Omishto is torn between her mother's materialism and her "aunt's" life in the wilds of Florida swampland at one with the native panthers. When a huge storm washes all worlds together Omishto joins her lost tribe, choosing their understanding over her mother's consumer-driven culture. She comes

to see how both her future, and her tribe's is interwined with the panther's destiny.

Omishto is linked to our other young women because she chooses her primal, natural, animal heritage over her modern "human" heritage. When she and our other young women are pushed to choose a side of themselves, they surprisingly align themselves with their animal nature. Vivian listens to her wild nature and becomes more wolf-like than human. Owl coaxes her new friend to embrace his owl nature as the site of his authenticity. Lady, after a time in the dog world states flatly:

> I don't want to be a human being... I want to be a quick and fast and happy and then dead...I don't want to go to work. I don't want to be responsible. I want to be a dog. (235)

Similarly, Eva, forced to choose between a chimp world, or a human world, ultimately sees the chimp world as more humane, more natural, more freeing.

There's a message here for those of us who work with adolescents. We, as teachers and parents and adults must keep the sense of humanity alive within our adolescents. We must be gentle with our manipulations, our attempts to lead adolescents into adulthood. We must delight in exploratory transformation, and recognize both the animal and human sides in the fullest sense possible.

These books show an animal side full of instinctual knowledge tied to the richness of the natural world. This animal world, which we often fear, is more humane, more loving and sensitive than "civilized" culture (at least in these books). In contrast these books show the human side as too often fraught with cruelty, intolerance and horror.

Thomas Hine states in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager:* "A person standing at [the threshold of adulthood] must be invited to come through the door. But those with power to extend the invitation are often ambivalent about surrendering their authority (46)." The young adults portrayed in these books have an urgency to learn. And we have a duty to welcome them through doors, offering experience, and opportunities. They have much to experience, and in many situations they don't know the rules.

We as adults must see the mysterious and sometimes brutal truths which adolescents face daily. I don't think we should be frightened when we look at the truth of adolescent lives. There's more hope, and freshness than horror. Any one who has spent any time working with adolescents would agree with Patricia Hersch's summary in *A Tribe Apart: A Journey to the Heart of American Adolescence.* Hersh states passionately: "The kids, if we get to know them, will decimate every long held stereotype any adult has

ever had about teens… They are not all doing bad things…they are simply more complex than we could ever imagine (232)."

They should be. They are the evolving model, the future in progress. We shouldn't look for anything less than the total emerging animal.

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